

Transgender

The term “transgender” refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex originally assigned to them at birth or whose gender expression varies significantly from what is traditionally associated with or typical for that sex (i.e., people identified as male at birth who subsequently identify as female (MtF), and people identified as female at birth who later identify as male (FtM))(Institute of Medicine, 2011). Some transgender people do not fit into either of these binary categories (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

The transgender population is diverse in gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation. Some transgender individuals have undergone medical interventions to alter their sexual anatomy and physiology, others wish to have such procedures in the future, while others are not interested in having any procedures. Transgender people can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual in their sexual orientation (Institute of Medicine, 2011). In the United States, there are thought to be more MtFs than FtMs (Institute of Medicine, 2011). There are no available estimates of the number of individuals who identify as transgender in Illinois.

Although identifying as transgender does not alone increase HIV risk, transgender individuals are often marginalized and face significant social stigma (Grant et al., 2010). Sex work is common among the transgender population and previous research has suggested that many transgender individuals enter into sex work because of structural-level factors such as social stigma and employment discrimination (Reisner et al., 2009). Sex work has been consistently associated with HIV seropositivity among MtF transgender individuals (Reisner et al., 2009). High levels of substance abuse and psychological distress (e.g., depression, earlier suicide attempts, history of sexual abuse) have been observed among transgender women, which may contribute to elevated HIV sexual risk behavior (Reisner et al., 2009).

A review of multiple studies suggests that the rate of HIV infection in the U.S. transgender population is very high with an estimated 28% of MtF transgender living with HIV infection (Herbst et al., 2008). Among FtM, HIV rates were estimated to be significantly

lower though, not many studies of the FtM population have been conducted (Herbst et al., 2008).

The Illinois HIV/AIDS registry began collecting current gender information, in addition to biological sex, in 2009. Through the end of 2013, 114 individuals who identify as transgender were diagnosed with HIV disease in Illinois (many individuals were diagnosed prior to 2009). Of these individuals, 98% were MtF. The primary transmission risk factor identified was sexual contact with men.

Another source of information regarding HIV infection rates among the Illinois transgender population is the HIV testing positivity rate among MtF. Among MtFs tested by IDPH and the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse between 2008 and 2013, 1.9% were positive for HIV. This rate fell between the HIV seropositivity rates for African American MSM (2.8%) and Latino MSM (1.8%) (Illinois Department of Public Health, 2014).

Targeted outreach and culturally appropriate interventions are needed to reduce HIV infection rates in this high-risk population.

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